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Verifying the Verification Report

The Senate Intelligence Committee's super-secret report on SALT II verification problems, now under lock and key in a remote corner of Capitol Hill, contradicts the verbal summary delivered to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by intelligence committee Chairman Birch Bayh.

Sen. Bayh's two days of testimony behind closed doors, according to those present, was "highly selective." Ignoring the bad news and inflating the good, it differed in word and spirit from the 177-page report Bayh's committee prepared for the guidance of the foreign relations panel in considering the new arms limitation treaty.

That report is stamped "secret codeword," a classification reserved for unusually sensitive intelligence matters. The few senators who have followed burdensome security regulations to read the report cannot take the Senate floor to dispute Bayh. With the Senate required to vote on matters removed from public discussion, the few senators who understand what is going on—including some supporters of the SALT process—are frustrated both by the system and what they consider Bayh's manipulation of it.

Bayh's testimony did not make clear to listeners that the "secret codeword" report states unequivocally that the SALT II protocol (lasting to Dec. 31, 1981) cannot be verified. As for the treaty itself, the report downgrades Carter administration statements that monitoring Soviet weapons advances will be all that much easier with the treaty than without it.

"The Soviets could test a new ICBM system with a launch weight as much as 20 to 40 percent above the SS19 with less than a 50 percent chance of detection," the report says. This would seem to threaten enforcement of the SALT II provision that the one "new" system permitted by the treaty cannot be larger than the Soviet SS19.

Analyzing what Moscow could do secretly in an effort to "break out" of the

treaty's limitations, the report states: "If a covert deployment were attempted, the Soviets could evade detection and identification of the activity for as long as three years, during which some 200 missiles might become operational." So much for claimed monitoring advantages the United States would enjoy by ratifying the treaty; a block of 200 new missiles could change overnight the strategic balance of power.

The importance of Bayh's testimony lies in its impact on fellow senators. They tend to accept the chairman's statements at face value, without recognizing nuances, subtleties or fine print.

That tendency unites with problems of dealing with classified information to tie the hands and close the mouths of even the senators most skeptical about verification. The 177-page report is under 24-hour guard in an obscure chamber on the top floor of the Capitol. Admittance is restricted to the 100 senators themselves during normal working hours. No copies may be made; nor may notes on the report be taken out of the room.

Very few senators have read it, but an exception is Sen. John Glenn, a supporter of the SALT process but an informed skeptic on verification. He ripped Bayh's testimony apart in cross-examination during the foreign relations committee hearing. When we asked Glenn to confirm our information about the report, he declined but then put the problem in a nutshell:

"Nothing I have read or heard so far takes care of the verification problem, but I cannot even say why because of the high security classification that has been hung on this whole matter. What we have is euphoria based on official statements."

That euphoria might dissipate if every senator read the report, taking time out of tight schedules to cope with security limitations. They would learn that "the confidence with which we can detect tests of an ICBM with a mobile launcher [prohibited by the protocol] will be low at best."

Although cruise missiles with a ground-

launched or sea-launched range of more than 600 kilometers are banned during the three-year protocol, the report warns that "monitoring small changes in air intakes, horizontal and vertical stabilizers, antennae and warhead attachment points, could be important SALT II monitoring tasks concerning cruise missile range. . . . Monitoring such changes would be extremely difficult."

The report says monitoring pluses from SALT II will be few and far between. As a strong treaty advocate, Bayh naturally dwelled on these. But he sped lightly over the damaging statement that the United States consistently has exaggerated its ability to "monitor Soviet production" of nuclear weapons.

Nobody can forecast the impact of SALT ratification even if every senator were fully aware of these facts. But to accept Bayh's clearly loaded testimony in favor of the treaty is tantamount to voting blind, a condition that someday could return to haunt the Senate.